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ABSTRACT

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers' Network presents suggestions for teachers for eliminating homophobia in schools. The following suggestions are intended as starting points as teachers begin to think about the issue of homophobia in school: (1) guarantee equality; (2) create a safe environment; (3) provide role models; (4) provide support for students; (5) provide training for faculty and staff; (6) reassess the curriculum; (7) provide appropriate health care and education; (8) diversify library and media holdings; (9) broaden enlightenment programs; and (10) do not assume that students and other teachers are heterosexual. Gay and lesbian members of the school community need to know that their schools value equality and that they are protected against discrimination. Schools should add sexual orientation to their statements of nondiscrimination. For students, peer support and acceptance is the key to a feeling of belonging. Being gay is not a health issue, but health education on sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases should address the issues of gay and lesbian people sensitively. (SLD)

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What You Can Do... To Help End Homophobia in Your School.
Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN).

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GLSTN

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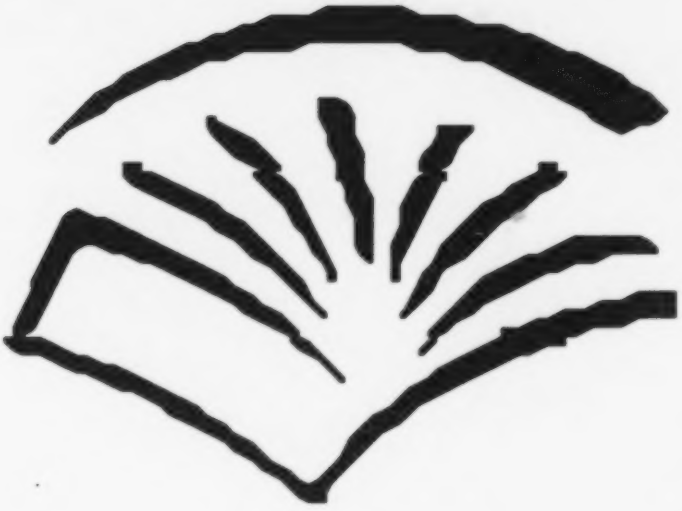
To Help End Homophobia in Your School



GLSTN

122 West 26th St., Suite 1100
New York, NY 10001
P: 212.727.0135, F: 212.727.0254
Email: glstn@glstn.org
web: http://www.glstn.org/freedom/

Because Bigotry in Schools is Wrong

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The suggestions below are not all-inclusive but are intended as starting points as you begin to think about how to end homophobia in your school.

1. Guarantee Equality

Gay and lesbian members of the school community need to know that their schools value equality and that they are protected against discrimination. Schools should add "sexual orientation" to their non-discrimination statements in all school publications as a way to communicate their commitment to equal treatment for all.

2. Create a Safe Environment

Every member of the community has a right to play his or her role without fear of harassment by peers: it is the school's obligation to take pro-active measures to ensure this right. However, in far too many schools, physical and verbal harassment against gay and lesbian people is the norm. Schools must make it clear that neither physical violence nor harassing language like "faggot" and "dyke" will be tolerated. Clear harassment policies, which include sexual orientation as a protected category, must be developed and then publicized to the entire school community, so that the consequences of and procedures for dealing with such behavior are clear to all.

3. Provide Role Models

Studies consistently show that personal acquaintance with gay and lesbian people is the most effective way of reducing homophobic bigotry. Both gay and straight students benefit from having role models such as openly gay teachers coaches and administrators: straight students are offered an alternative to the inaccurate stereotypes with which they have been raised, and gay students get the chance (often for the first time) to see healthy gay adults, which gives them hope for their own future. Schools need to create the conditions necessary for gay faculty to feel safe in "coming out," just as heterosexual faculty "come out" daily through such acts as wearing wedding rings.

If no role models are available from within the school community, the school must work to bring in such individuals from beyond the campus. Inviting presenters from a local gay and lesbian speakers bureau, gay youth group, or college gay and lesbian student association can help fill the gap left by the absence of openly gay faculty. These measures, however, cannot substitute for having on-campus role models, and should be seen as interim arrangements until these can be provided.

Everyone—gay or straight—is harmed by homophobia in schools

4. Provide Support for Students

Peer support and acceptance is the key to any student's feeling that he or she "belongs" in the school. "Gay-Straight Alliances" have been the key to creating such an atmosphere in many schools. These groups welcome membership from any student interested in understanding issues of homophobia and sexual identity, regardless of sexual orientation. They have been successfully established in all kinds of schools and in communities as diverse as Los Angeles, Chapel Hill, N.C., Lincoln, Nebraska, and Minneapolis. The diverse range of schools which now have "GSAs" indicates that, if there is a will, there is a way to establish one in any school.

5. Provide Training for Faculty and Sta

School staff need to be equipped to serve all the students with whom they work, including gay and lesbian ones. Understanding the needs of gay and lesbian youth, and developing the skills to meet those needs, should be expected of all teachers. Schools must provide the ongoing training necessary for the faculty to fulfill this expectation.

6. Reassess the Curriculum

Teachers need to incorporate gay and lesbian issues throughout the curriculum -- not just in classes such as health education, but in traditional disciplines such as English, History, and Science. This can be done in three ways. First, incorporating new scholarship in fields such as gay history can now be done easily, due to the proliferation of such material in recent years. Second, teachers can address the impact of sexual identity on works by gay and lesbian people already included in our curriculum, such as the novels of Virginia Woolf, the music of Tchaikovsky, or the poetry of Walt Whitman. Finally, teachers can undo the "hidden heterosexism" of the curriculum, such as the exclusive use of opposite-sex couples in math word problems and foreign language exercises. The bulk of the school day is spent in class as long as gay and lesbian issues are seen as "special" and outside the classroom, students will continue to see gay and lesbian people as margina

7. Provide Appropriate Health Care and Education

While being gay is not a "health issue" (any more than being heterosexual is), health education on sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases should sensitively address the particular issues of gay and lesbian people in this field. Counselors and other health staff should be particularly careful to make their sensitivity to gay issues clear, as the history of psychiatric "cures" for homosexuality has led to a climate of distrust between many gay people and the health care profession.

8. Diversify Library and Media Holdings

Often, the library is the first place students turn for accurate sexuality information. Too often, few or no works on gay and lesbian issues are found there. Librarians and media specialists need to be sure their holdings are up to date and reflect the diversity of our world. The existence of collections addressing gay and lesbian issues needs to be communicated to the community, through events such as book displays which include gay and lesbian titles.

9. Broaden Entertainment Programs

"Extracurricular" activities often set the tone for the community. Programs such as assemblies and "film nights" should regularly include gay and lesbian content that reflects the diversity of our nation.

10. Do Not Assume Heterosexuality

The constant assumption of heterosexuality renders gay and lesbian people, youth in particular, invisible. Such invisibility is devastating to the individual's sense of self. Both the school as an institution and its professionals as individuals must be inclusive in their language and attitudes. Inviting "spouses" instead of "friends," offering health care only to heterosexual families, and encouraging students to find opposite sex dates, are all inappropriate manifestations of heterosexism. By reminding themselves that gay and lesbian people are found on every staff, in every classroom, and on every team (which they are), faculty can "unlearn" heterosexism and become more inclusive in both word and deed.

What is GLSTN?

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network is the only national organization of gay and straight, educators and community members, working to address issues of homophobia and heterosexism in K-12 public, private, and parochial schools.

How does GLSTN work?

GLSTN is a grass-roots organization. Within the context of the GLSTN mission statement and the policies established by its National Board, local Chapters determine their own programming and are supported with training, materials and support from the national staff. The National Board is composed of Chapter representatives and at-large members, with each local chapter developing its own board as well. A portion of all contributions made to GLSTN is returned to local groups to fund programming in the giver's community. For membership information see the enclosed form or call the GLSTN office in New York.

What does GLSTN do?

GLSTN's goal is to create change. We engage in a number of activities to do this, including:

1. In-School Programming: GLSTN does staff trainings, provides educational resources, conducts conferences, and produces educational videos.
2. Community Organizing: GLSTN has a network of over 40 local Chapters working to create change in their communities' school. GLSTN also maintains an extensive world wide web site, which provides practical resources for community members working to end homophobia in schools.
3. Advocacy: GLSTN advocates for change via public education campaigns, and works to influence local, state, and national leaders in education to bring about positive change.